How to Strengthen Oral Motor Skills and Reduce Drooling in Autistic Children

Noticing your child drool more than their peers or struggle with chewing, swallowing, or mouth coordination can feel confusing and emotional. Many parents of autistic children observe these challenges during meals, conversations, or play and wonder how best to support their child. These experiences are more common than many realize and are often connected to oral motor skill development.

Oral motor skills play a vital role in how children eat, drink, speak, and manage saliva. When these skills develop differently in autistic children, gentle and structured support can make a meaningful difference. Understanding oral motor development helps families feel reassured and confident about taking the next steps.

Key Takeaways

- Oral motor skills affect chewing, swallowing, speech, and saliva control
- Strengthening oral motor skills can help reduce drooling in autistic children
- Targeted oral motor exercises improve coordination, awareness, and comfort
- Activities should respect a child's sensory needs and developmental readiness
- Consistent, supportive practice encourages long-term progress and confidence

What Are Oral Motor Skills?

Oral motor skills refer to the coordinated movements of the lips, tongue, jaw, cheeks, and palate. These muscles work together throughout the day, often without conscious effort, to support eating, drinking, swallowing, and speech.

In autistic children, oral motor development may follow a different timeline or pattern. This can be influenced by sensory sensitivities, muscle tone differences, motor planning challenges, or reduced oral awareness. These differences are not limitations—they simply reflect a unique developmental pathway.

Early oral motor development begins in infancy through feeding skills such as sucking, swallowing, and transitioning to textured foods. Some children may take longer to accept solids, gag with new textures, or struggle to move food efficiently in their mouth. As children grow, oral motor demands increase, especially for chewing complex foods, managing saliva, and producing clear speech sounds.

When oral motor skills are still developing, supportive exercises can gently strengthen these foundations and improve daily comfort.

Which Children Benefit From Oral Motor Exercises?

Oral motor exercises are helpful for children who show signs such as:

- Frequent or persistent drooling
- Difficulty keeping the mouth closed
- Fatigue during chewing or mealtimes
- Pocketing food in the cheeks
- Avoidance of chewy or textured foods
- Reduced awareness of saliva in the mouth

Drooling is not a behavioral issue—it often signals that the muscles responsible for lip closure, swallowing, and oral awareness need additional support. Strengthening these muscles improves coordination and helps children manage saliva more effectively.

Every child's needs are different. A qualified therapist evaluates oral motor strength, coordination, sensory preferences, and endurance before recommending exercises. This individualized approach ensures activities are effective, safe, and emotionally comfortable.

Oral Motor Exercises for Autistic Children

Oral motor exercises are designed to mirror natural mouth movements while encouraging repetition and control. When practiced regularly and playfully, they help build stronger, more coordinated oral patterns.

All activities should feel engaging and pressure-free, allowing the child to participate at their own pace.

Lip Strengthening Exercises

Strong lip closure helps with swallowing, sipping, speech sounds, and saliva control. Reduced lip strength or awareness often contributes to drooling.

Helpful activities include:

- Blowing cotton balls or bubbles
- Drinking thick liquids through a straw
- Exaggerated lip movements during songs or games

These exercises improve lip strength, endurance, and awareness, supporting better saliva management and clearer speech production.

Cheek Muscle Exercises

Cheeks guide food during chewing. Weak cheek muscles can make eating tiring and less efficient.

Cheek-strengthening activities may include:

- Puffing cheeks and holding air
- Blowing whistles or harmonicas
- Gentle resistance exercises guided by a therapist

Stronger cheeks help move food smoothly, reduce pocketing, and improve overall oral awareness.

Jaw Stability Exercises

The jaw provides stability for chewing and speaking. Poor jaw control can lead to fatigue and inefficient chewing.

Jaw exercises may involve:

- Controlled biting on chewable tools
- Slow, rhythmic chewing patterns
- Introducing soft, chewy foods that encourage symmetrical jaw use

Improved jaw stability supports lip closure and makes saliva control easier.

Tongue Coordination Exercises

The tongue is essential for moving food, forming a swallow, and managing saliva. Reduced tongue strength or awareness often contributes to drooling.

Tongue exercises include:

- Touching the tongue to different areas of the mouth
- Licking spreads or textured foods
- Imitation games that encourage tongue movement

Over time, these exercises help the tongue move saliva efficiently toward the throat for swallowing.

Palate Awareness Exercises

The palate supports swallowing and speech resonance. Limited palate movement can affect swallowing pressure and sound production.

Activities may include:

- Guided swallowing practice
- Gentle humming or vocal play
- Therapist-led exercises encouraging movement toward the roof of the mouth

These exercises improve coordination between the tongue and palate, supporting smoother swallowing and reduced drooling.

Benefits of Oral Motor Therapy

Strengthening oral motor skills offers both physical and emotional benefits. Children often show:

- Improved chewing endurance
- Better saliva control
- Increased acceptance of textured foods
- Enhanced speech clarity
- Greater confidence during meals

As oral awareness improves, children become better able to sense saliva buildup and swallow naturally. Families frequently notice reduced frustration and more positive mealtime experiences.

How KidAble Supports Oral Motor Development

At KidAble, oral motor skill development is approached with patience, respect, and individualized care. Our occupational therapists specialize in motor foundations, sensory integration, and child-led therapy.

Each program is tailored to the child's unique needs, sensory profile, and emotional readiness. Therapy sessions blend purposeful movement, play, and motor planning to strengthen facial, jaw, and oral muscles without pressure.

We work closely with families to ensure strategies feel natural, supportive, and sustainable at home.

Conclusion

Oral motor skills influence many essential parts of a child's daily life—from feeding and swallowing to speech and social interaction. For autistic children, strengthening these skills and reducing drooling is not about rushing progress, but about offering gentle, consistent opportunities for growth.

With the guidance of a trained therapist and the support of caregivers, children can develop stronger coordination, improved comfort, and greater confidence. Every step forward, no matter how small, contributes meaningfully to their well-being and independence.